

WITNESS AND COMMUNICATION

At the 1974 General Assembly the question was raised about the form of service to be used at burials where there may be a considerable proportion of non-Christians present, and it is clear that some very big problems loom up for answer, but the matter is not perhaps essentially different from that which faces the minister at many wedding or baptismal services. Witness and communication are both involved. The following sermon touches indirectly on the problem and on some others which are very relevant to the pattern and content of the church service of today.

(EDITOR)

JOHN 14:5, 6

Thomas said, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how *can* we know the way?' Jesus said: 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me'.

A question which has become rhetorical. And an answer which has become an embarrassment.

The question first: 'We do not know where you are going, so how *can* we know the way?' It is an understandable question, for Jesus was speaking allusively, in high-flown metaphors, not plain men's talk. Where and what was this house with many rooms? A royal palace of the restored House of David? A secret monastery in the desert? The house of the Resurrected Dead, far to the West or beyond the skies? The metaphorical dwelling-place provided in the history of the race for the founders of great religions? I don't know which, if any, of these alternatives interested Thomas. But centuries later I can sympathize with his question, with his desire for more data. Come clean, Jesus, what do you *really* mean?

Thomas, of course, did not ask the question in that way. 'Lord', he began. And as far as we know he meant it. He believed, that is to say, that Jesus was talking about something which might make sense, something potentially meaningful – if only he would be more explicit. Our culture, however, is not so sure. For what was the sequel of these dialogues of Jesus and his disciples but centuries of theological squabbling and ultimately of religious wars, centuries of so-called holy men pulling one another's beards, excommunicating one another, consigning multitudes to the fear of the eternal fire, to the fear that they might not be among the elect, to the fear – *sic transit gloria ecclesiae* – of social ostracism through expulsion from the

Mothers' Union. Small wonder then that a few men some centuries back began to drop first the 'lord' and then the question. Small wonder that many, following their example, have turned their attention from theology to science, from the questions no one could answer satisfactorily to the questions which could be answered – to weighing, and measuring, and ultimately to managing natural phenomena and the human environment.

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
The proper study of mankind is man.

And an absorbing study it has been. Much more fruitful than theology, and much more rewarding in terms of material comforts our superstitious predecessors never knew. So who now trembles before the majestic authority of the Athanasian Creed? 'Quicumque vult . . .' whosoever will be saved . . . whosoever is interested. Thomas's question never did get adequate answers. The answers were too etherial, too ambiguous, too divisive, too unproductive. 'We do not know where you are going, so how *can* we know the way?' We have waited too long for a satisfactory answer. The question has become rhetorical, maybe like that other question: 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?' It is not that nobody now believes in talk of this kind, just that it has been isolated and expelled from the everyday world. It is confined to islands of thought of a peculiar kind, which exist only among Christians, in churches, or at the great high points of life and in moments of crisis or desperation. But these islands are rather like the wards of a psychiatric hospital, where the special language of the patients may make sense in the context of their illnesses, but does not make sense outside. Or they are like dreams, in which we inhabit a different world, where our emotions are heightened, and our perceptions altered. But the moment of waking, the short walk from the ward to the front door of the hospital, the pause during which the communion elements are removed from the table – these all represent states of transition, from the place where language is peculiar to the place where it is ordinary and down to earth. And when it comes to the crunch, very much that everyone, Christians included, thinks, says and does, is founded on the assumption that it is the mundane everyday language which is really real.

But the trouble with the contemporary way of defining the really real – apart from the fact that it is not the way most previous generations have defined it – is that it has cut us off from the depths of our own being, and narrowed the horizon of our understanding. And it is to precisely those dreams and psychiatric wards, which the bright hopes of scientific culture a generation ago wished to banish from consciousness, that many people are now turning for clues to

whole regions of the truth which we have lost. I am reminded of someone who recently came to see me to talk about a very real personal and spiritual problem. He came on a morning when the sun was bright, the spring green, the room we were in warm and comfortable; and he said how hard it was to see his problem as real on a day and in a room like that. But that the problem was real I have no doubt. So with the world. We live in the bright and artificial light of a scientific and urban-industrial culture, and in the brightness and the comfort it is hard to believe in the reality of spiritual dimensions. But they are there. It is we who are myopic. We are like a man who looks at the sky only in bright daylight and declares there can be no other stars than the sun.

Blake is coming into his own at last:

Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau:
 Mock on, Mock on: 'tis all in vain!
 You throw the sand against the wind,
 And the wind blows it back again.
 And every sand becomes a Gem
 Reflected in the beams divine;
 Blown back they blind the mocking Eye,
 But still in Israel's paths they shine.
 The Atoms of Democritus
 And Newton's Particles of light
 Are sands upon the Red Sea shore,
 Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.

And not only Blake but George Herbert,

A man that looks on glass, / On it may stay his eye;
 Or if he pleaseth, through it pass, / And then the heaven espy.

Thomas's question was a real one then – a spiritual one at root, and therefore real. But what of Jesus' answer? 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me.' In a pluralist culture, a global village, such as ours has become, the *exclusiveness* of this answer has become an embarrassment. What about the countless believers in other religions, whom it is now impossible for us to avoid?

Well, I do not think that there is any easy way round this difficulty. I for one cannot believe that Christianity alone is true and all other religions false. And I am deeply conscious that we as Western Christians carry – but not in the way those who invented the term thought – the white man's burden. Our predecessors, that is, believed that Christianity was right for everyone and the other religions were wrong. They missed the point, and we have to carry the burden of their mistake.

But having said that, I do not believe that we Christians should, or indeed that most of us can, renounce our burden and our tradition. The Christian faith, especially if we include its heretics as well as its orthodox, is one of the greatest human traditions. It is full of the deepest insights and the most profound spiritual truth, as the prophets of many other religions have understood. And even if it is not, as was once thought, the last word about divine reality, it contains many of the most important words before the last.

As such the Christian faith need not be exclusive. When Jesus says 'No one can come to the Father but by me' we need not read this as meaning that no one can come to the Father except he becomes a Christian – rather that no one can come to the Father except through the light that enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world – the light that enlightened Isaiah and Plato and Zoroaster and Buddha and many others. What men saw and see in that light differs. And how they described and describe what they saw differs even more. But it is the same light. And for us it shines through Jesus Christ.

This does not mean that we do not have much to learn from other faiths. Far from it. I suspect that we shall learn as we go on in the modern world that we have far more to learn than we ever imagined. But what we learn will be of little use, unless our conversation with believers of other faiths is conversation with them in the depth of their experience. And in such conversation we shall learn little of these depths unless our learning is illuminated by what we know from the depths of our own experience—supremely from the depths of our sacramental experience, here and now, in the holy mysteries of the blessed body and blood, where we taste and see that the Lord is good, and feed on him in our hearts with thanksgiving.

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